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AUTHOR	Langmeyer, David B.
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ABSTRACT

In the field of child and family programs, a needs assessment, which is essentially a fact-finding exercise, can be conducted either by focusing on a particular program or by examining a population of interest. In conducting a needs assessment, it is important to be systematic, be clear about the information which is sought, be specific about the purpose of the assessment, and be careful about defining the target audience. The first step involves selecting the method for gathering information. Methods include social indicators, key informants, community forums, surveys of the community, and nominal group method. The second step is selecting the sources of information. People from whom information is gathered should be selected from the population to whom the results will be applied. Care should be taken to solicit representatives from larger groups in a way which does not bias the results. Other steps in the needs assessment include assigning responsibilities for assessment activities, conducting the information gathering, and analyzing and reporting the information. (JDD)

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Chapel Hill Training-Outreach Project, 800 Eastowne Drive, Suite 105, Chapel Hill, NC 27514
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Sticky Figures: *Using a Needs Assessment*

"You can't always get what you want,
but, if you try, sometimes you find
you get what you need."
—Rolling Stones

Introduction

Child and family programs exist to render services which will alleviate problems or satisfy needs. However, these problems are not always obvious, or, even if they are clear to some people, other people may disagree. In such cases a needs assessment, which is essentially a fact-finding exercise, can be helpful.

A needs assessment can be conducted either by focusing on a particular program, such as a community's need for a crisis nursery, or, by examining a population of interest, e.g., adolescents in Jefferson County, or women who are pregnant.

If the assessment is surveying a certain area, specific groups can be targeted. For example, if a respite care program proposes to serve families who have children with developmental disabilities, then one would want to query only families with children with developmental disabilities.

There are several steps to consider when developing a plan to conduct a needs assessment. These steps include:

- Selecting the method for gathering information
- Selecting the sources of information
- Assigning responsibilities for activities of the needs assessment
- Conducting the information gathering
- Analyzing and reporting the information

In general, when conducting any type of needs assessment, be systematic, clear about the information which is sought, specific about the purpose(s) of the assessment, and careful about defining the target audience.

Information Gathering Methods

There are many methods for obtaining information concerning community needs. Some methods use pre-existing information about the general community and/or segments of the population which are likely to access crisis nursery or respite care services. Other methods involve written or verbal responses to requests for information. The selection of a particular method (or methods) depends on the nature of the questions being asked, the availability of respondents or existing information, the resources available to conduct the assessment, and the experience and skills of the people who will gather the information.

Social Indicators

This approach is based on descriptive statistics in public records and reports such as the census or welfare reports. The underlying assumption is that useful estimates of need are indicated by such statistics or that the statistics may be correlated with persons in need of services.

For example, if temporary child care is being promoted for a population of women with substance abuse problems who have children, there might be information from the county or state which has already estimated or counted women in treatment who have children. If the target population is families with children who have severe developmental disabilities, there may be existing community statistics on the number of children who have severe developmental disabilities and their ages.

Another approach starts with previous research, or the assumption that the existence of certain defined groups of people, or conditions of society, results in greater or lesser needs for services. For example, it has been assumed that as unemployment increases, family violence increases and thus there might be an increase in the need for crisis nurseries.

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Problems may occur with this approach due to the inadequacy and incompleteness of the assumptions used to relate various social indicators to the direct need for crisis nurseries or respite care services. The direct application of established statistics to estimate the size of a specific population may prove more useful to a local program than using social indicators as an estimate of service need.

Key Informant

The Key Informant technique is a relatively simple and inexpensive survey technique. It involves interaction with selected community leaders and agency representatives to estimate the needs for temporary child care and the possible acceptance of such services by the community and potential consumers. The process of discussion and interaction can also establish and strengthen lines of communication with people and agencies who might be important in the future provision of crisis nursery or respite care services.

The major limitation to the Key Informant approach is that it has a built-in bias toward the individual or organizational perspectives of those surveyed. These perspectives, even collectively, may not be representative of the community or constitute an accurate appraisal of the amount or types of needs which exist. Key informants may not be aware of people who are not visible to them. And, since it is usually professionals describing and making judgements about potential consumers, it does not give a direct voice to the consumers.

Be systematic when using the Key Informant method. Select the key informants carefully as representatives of the community who are likely to be knowledgeable about the services, including consumers. Determine the questions to be asked. Try to ask each informant the same questions as you develop the questions. Consider what you will do with the answers, why you are asking the questions, and how you will interpret the results.

Information can be gathered in person or, if brief, on the telephone. If you are going to ask an extensive set of questions, it might be desirable to contact the informants ahead of time. Give them an idea of the commitment they are being asked to make (time, types of questions, etc.), and schedule an appointment to conduct the actual survey.

Community Forums

The Community Forum approach, similar to an open town meeting, is a gathering of members of a designated community. It is a technique for gaining citizen involvement in the program, ascertaining their reactions, and using their responses as a source of further problem identification. This approach can be adapted to identify a wide variety of needs and problems.

Because the forum is a large meeting, it precludes a certain amount of depth in the investigation of the questions and expressed needs. Not everyone will necessarily be able to speak. Controlled sampling in a community forum is virtually impossible and would be contrary to the purposes of the forum. The output depends very sensitively on the persons who participate.

There are three precautions which could strengthen a Community Forum:

- be sure that the meeting participants represent a cross-section of the community or specific population being assessed in terms of age, race, ethnicity, income, and education;
- take care in designing the meeting and the process in which it is embedded; and
- entrust the meeting to a skilled, experienced facilitator.

The process of running the meeting should include ground rules which are agreed upon by those present. Ground rules may include: establishing a maximum speaking time; giving speaking preference to people who have not yet spoken; and, getting permission from the participants to give reminders about the purpose of the forum and the questions/issues which are central to the discussion.

Surveys of the Community

A survey or questionnaire represents a way of gathering information from a large number of people. It needs to be done with thought and purpose. Particular attention should be paid to the questions being asked, the target audience from which the information is wanted, and the way in which the results from the survey will be used.

Begin by specifying the scope of the survey. Identify issues the survey will address, the purpose of the survey, and what is hoped to be accomplished through it.

Next list specific objectives. The questions being investigated should be listed in clear and unambiguous terms. For example "What percentage of the community is aware of the existence of our agency?"; "Of those people who have used our service once, what proportion would use it again if necessary?" Use short questions which can be answered with checklists, multiple choice, yes-no responses or, if really needed, open-ended answers.

It is important to consider to whom the results will be applied. If the questions concern consumer opinions, attitudes and beliefs, it would be a mistake to survey the community at large, when only a few might be consumers. When the target audience is known, it is desirable

to review the format and content of the survey with the specific group in mind. Make sure the questions are relevant to the group and written at an appropriate reading level.

Finally, the issue of how the information will be used is important. With the specific survey in hand, consider how it will be summarized and the results analyzed. Determine how the questions will be scored and the way in which the scoring will be summarized. If open-ended questions are asked or comments solicited, how will the answers be handled? Is there a coding scheme which will allow sense to be made of the many different answers which will be given to open-ended questions?

Nominal Group Method

The Nominal Group Method is a structured workshop minimizing face-to-face interaction among the participants in order to obtain the view of a wider range of participants. The workshop is a structured group setting composed of a small group of people with shared views regarding community needs, barriers to services, or needed programs. The result is a broad listing of needs, barriers, or desired programs, and a group rank-ordering of priority.

The nominal group approach consists of a group responding to a series of pre-defined questions. Possible questions might be: "Is there a need in the community for a crisis nursery program?", "How many people would use a crisis nursery program if one were offered?", or "Where might a crisis nursery program be located to be most useful?" Each question is presented to the group separately.

Steps for using the modified nominal group method are:

- ***Individual problem-issue descriptions***: The leader for the meeting presents questions formulated by the program for group exploration. The questions might be listed on a flip chart or blackboard and kept in front of the group during the discussion. Without discussion, the individual members of the group are asked to think about each question and formulate responses to them.
- ***Group round-robin***: Following the individual specifications of problems and issues, the leader goes around the group and asks each group member to present one idea in round-robin fashion. As ideas are recorded, the leaders ask if other members of the group listed the same item. If so, a check is placed beside the item as recorded. The leader does not try to coalesce or combine problem statements in any other way. No comments are permitted during this part of the meeting from other participants. The round robin continues until there are no additional suggestions (participants can pass if they have no more suggestions).
- ***Group discussion***: Following the completed round robin activity, the group is invited to clarify and elaborate on the issues presented. The leader condenses the suggestions and merges those which appear to be similar with permission from the persons who made the suggestions. There should not be criticism or defense of any item; but participants may ask each other to clarify what they had intended to say.
- ***Selection and ranking***: Group members are next asked to vote on the five or so nominated items which they feel are most important. Group members should be given some time in which to think about their choices.
- ***Group tally***: The leader tallies the votes of the group members. The final period is a general discussion of the ranking of those issues that achieved the highest priority by vote and adjustment if the group is not comfortable with the results.

The process is repeated for each major question prepared for the meeting.

Selecting the Sources of Information

In general, the people from whom information is gathered should be selected from the population to whom the results will be applied. If questions are asked about the community as a whole, then the informants should come from the community. If questions are being asked about probable consumers, then the informants should come from the group who meet the criteria for the services.

Some of the common groups from whom information is sought are the people receiving services, the community at large, targeted subsets of the community at large who meet the criteria for service, and other service providers in the community. Care should be taken to solicit representatives from larger groups (i.e., community) in a way which does not bias the results. The best way of doing this is to "randomly" sample from the larger group. This means that each person in the larger group has an equal chance of being selected as a source of information.

It is often difficult to be truly random, but care should be taken not to introduce purposeful bias. An example would be selecting families who have used the services and have come back repeatedly, eliminating those who had used the service once and never again. It reasonably could be assumed that those who repeatedly used the service were satisfied with it.

For surveys and questionnaires which are distributed "randomly" the returns are probably not "random." It is likely that those with complaints, or those who have been particularly happy with the experience will be motivated to reply. Follow-up prompting to increase the rate of returns is desirable. Even so, there is no perfect solution to overcome problems of selection in the sample of respondents.

Assigning Responsibilities for Activities

One obvious step in conducting a needs assessment is to determine roles and responsibilities for the people conducting the assessment. The best approach might be to develop assignments, discuss and agree on the necessary products, and discuss and agree on the time lines and due dates for those products. The nature and style of the organization determines if the assessment is conducted as a series of individual tasks which come together as the needs assessment, or if the process is developed as a group activity from beginning to end.

Conducting the Information Gathering Process

Another consideration in the needs assessment process is the actual collecting of the information. There are some ways of doing this which are more desirable than others. If possible, a pilot of the selected information gathering approach should be tried. During the pilot, it can be determined if the information which is needed will, in fact, be collected, and whether the approach is consistent with the population from which the information is to be gathered.

During the early stage of information gathering, checks should be made on the process being used, the quality of the information received, and the products being developed. Such things as whether the surveys and questionnaires are being returned completed and whether the comments which are being recorded in community forums relate to the issues under consideration should be checked. If the results are not satisfactory then adjustments should be made in the process of the needs assessment.

Analyzing and Reporting the Information

The form in which the information is presented is important in the development of an effective needs assessment. The method of data presentation affects the degree to which findings are understood as well as received. See ARCH Factsheet No. 15 for specific information about analyzing and reporting information.

Conclusion

A needs assessment can be a useful tool to determine if a program is needed, if a program should be changed or expanded, and may also indicate whether or not the community and other agencies would support a program. It is most useful if it is done systematically, with a clear understanding of what the issues are and a clear understanding of who the sources of information should be.

About the Author: *David B. Langmeyer, Ph.D., is an Evaluation Consultant to ARCH. He was Chief of Evaluation and Research in the NC Division of MH/DD/SA Services for thirteen years.*

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